

## **The Roots of Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories**

Ben Suslick

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Rosemary Laughlin

What is a “rootabaga” anyway? You will only find it in a dictionary spelled as “rutabaga.” It comes from a Swedish word for a large, yellowish, turnip-like vegetable. Carl Sandburg’s unique spelling emphasizes that it is a root vegetable pulled from the earth. Sandburg had several strong influences or “roots” when he wrote Rootabaga Stories, a collection of short stories for children. These funny tales were influenced by his love for children and children’s nonsense literature, and by his fears of World War I.

Carl August Sandburg was born on January 6, 1878, in Galesburg, Illinois, son of Swedish immigrants August and Clara Sandburg. Sandburg had seven siblings, and all were taught at an early age to work hard and get an education. Sandburg’s official education ended after the eighth grade.

After leaving school at age 13, Sandburg looked around Galesburg for jobs to become more independent of his parents and to have money of his own. He found work delivering milk and papers, shining shoes, and doing odd jobs. After five years he borrowed his father’s railroad pass, since his father was a railroad worker, to look for higher paying jobs. This was his first significant travel that would affect his career by allowing him to roam different parts of the country about which he would later write. After being unsuccessful, he returned home to sign up in the Illinois Sixth Infantry of Volunteers to fight in the Spanish-American War of 1899.

After returning from the war, Sandburg had a status as a war veteran, which qualified him for free tuition to Lombard College (now Knox College) in Galesburg.

Although he left college without a degree, he acquired a new appetite for reading and writing poetry. He found language to be beautiful and found the common people's language to be great.

In 1907, Sandburg traveled to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and met an organizer for the Social-Democratic Party. While working for the Social-Democratic Party, Sandburg met schoolteacher Lillian Steichen and later that next year fell in love and married her. Sandburg met socialist Mayor Emil Seidel, who asked him to be his private secretary, and after two years, Sandburg started writing for the socialist Milwaukee Leader newspaper as a correspondent. In 1911, Sandburg's first child Margaret was born and his salary from the Leader was not enough, so he moved his family to Chicago, Illinois, where he found a job working for the Chicago Daily News as a special correspondence for 15 years.

While working for the Daily News, Sandburg wrote verses and stories. In 1915 his second daughter Janet was born. In 1920 his third daughter Helga was born. In 1922, wanting to entertain and please his beloved daughters, Sandburg wrote Rootabaga Stories.

Sandburg loved seeing smiles on young children. In Rootabaga Stories there are many tongue-twisting names, rhyming sounds in words, and wild fantasy scenes created with detailed images of sight and sound for children. Since his eldest daughter Margaret was diagnosed with epilepsy which had no cure, Sandburg was even more determined to make stories to keep him and her from thinking about her epilepsy. In Rootabaga Stories there is no evil, witches, or death. No one in Rootabaga County ever gets hurt or dies because Sandburg did not want to see any more death or sadness.

World War I was another influence on Rootabaga Stories. Sandburg was alarmed and angered by the futility and stupidity of the never-ending trench warfare. He despised leaders who sent soldiers to war to be brutally killed for no good reason whatsoever. The economic, political, and racial tensions at the time left him disheartened. He wanted Rootabaga Stories to give adults and children something to make them secure during the dark times. In Rootabaga Stories, Sandburg makes morality very clear to reinforce a sense of right and wrong so that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated. Characters take responsibility for their foolish actions; they learn that working a problem out by talking is more productive than fighting, as in the story where the animals lose their tales and get them back by working together.

Other children's stories influenced Sandburg's writing of Rootabaga Stories as well. Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear (along with the free verse of Walt Whitman) had the strongest stylistic influences because Sandburg used their techniques of nonsense through odd names, strange places, and bizarre details that stay in the readers mind. One such time was when the children named Ax Me No Questions and Please Gimme came to the Land of Balloon Pickers where balloons hung from the sky and the Balloon Pickers stood on their stilts gathering the balloons. The children next came to the Rootabaga County where pigs wore bibs, polka-dotted pigs wore polka dotted bibs, and the rail tracks changed from straight to zigzag lines.

Eighty-three years after its publication, many children still love having Rootabaga Stories read to them. One online reviewer says, "If you take the whimsy of Frank Baum's Oz books, crank it up a notch, throw a pinch of nonsense, add the diction of a poet, and mix well, then you will get Rootabaga Stories." He quotes his six-year-old

child and her soccer team who say that they like the nonsense, poetry, and the detailed images. His eleven-year-old girl, though put off by the bizarre elements, is still willing to hear the stories. I was also a “contemporary kid” who loved hearing Rootabaga Stories repeatedly as a child. My dad would read me his book that his parents read to him when he was my age. Clearly Sandburg realized that fantasy, nonsense, and word-play are among the roots of culture every child should have. [From “Carl Sandburg,” Literacy Rules. <http://literacyrules.com/WebDesign/110webs/leonel/leonel.htm> (Oct. 18, 2005); “Carl Sandburg,” Midnight Angel. [www.midnightangel308.com/august\\_2004\\_calendar.htm](http://www.midnightangel308.com/august_2004_calendar.htm) (Oct. 20, 2005); “Carl Sandburg,” National Portrait Gallery. <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/brush/sand.htm> (Oct. 13, 2005); Georges T. Dodds, “Rootabaga Stories,” SF Reviews. [www.sfsite.com/08a/rs/157.htm](http://www.sfsite.com/08a/rs/157.htm) (Oct. 18, 2005); Daniel Hoffman, “Moonlight Dries No Mittens: Carl Sandburg Reconsidered.” The Georgia Review (1978); Frank N. Magill, “Sandburg, Carl,” Critical Survey of Poetry; Penelope Niven, “Carl Sandburg’s Life,” Modern American Poetry. [www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/sandburg/sandburg\\_life.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sandburg/sandburg_life.htm) (Oct. 13, 2005); Penelope Niven, “Sandburg, Carl,” American National Biography; and “Rootabaga Stories.” Children’s Literature.]